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## **Rhetoric and Politics of the Female Body and Sex in Two Contemporary Chinese TV Drama Serials: *The Place Where Dreams Start* and *Blow the North Wind***

By Cai Shenshen<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

The discourse of body and sex has long been a taboo subject for Chinese females from time immemorial, and despite the Chinese Communist Party's stated policies and legislation of "female equality", the situation for females after the communist takeover improved only marginally and was most often just 'window-dressing'. However, with the end of the Cultural Revolution and the beginning of reforms to 'open up China' and the growing importance of modern Western cultural thought, there appeared a gradual change in the Chinese people's attitude towards discussions on body and sex. People began to understand the ideas of femininity, female desire and sensuality. Writers and filmmakers began to challenge the orthodox or established imagination and expectation of female desire, female body and sex and to use these new topics of body politics to question the rationale of the socialist political agenda.

This paper critiques two modern Chinese popular TV drama serials: *The Place Where Dreams Start* (1999 dir. Ye Jing) and *Blow the North Wind* (2009 dir. An Jian) and examines the rhetoric and "politics" of the female body and sexuality in socialist revolutionary context. The emphasis is on the body and sexual pursuit of the "revolutionary" female and her relationship and interactions with the revolution. This paper will adopt a feminist perspective, and it will examine how the female figures in these stories participated in and devoted themselves to the Revolution and how, despite their devotion to the Revolution, they were rejected by the Revolution. It will show that a feminist view that incorporates female desire, body and sexuality generates an alternative perspective from which to view the Chinese revolutionary discourse. In the texts examined, women are manipulated, abused and betrayed by the Revolution and its revolutionary principles, and eventually their ideas are renounced and discarded by the Revolution.

*Key words:* Body Politics, Sex, TV Drama Serials, Chinese Females, Cultural Revolution, Textual Analysis

### **Introduction**

The discourse of body and sex has always been a taboo subject for Chinese women (Li 1994: 314). Chinese women's awakening in terms of distinguishing women's sensitivities started to emerge after the May Fourth movement, and examples of this awakening may be found in female writer's texts of the time, such as those of Ding Ling, Xiao Hong and Zhang Ailing. However, the first real indication of feminine awareness and of caring for the female body is to be found in the ideas of anti-patriarchy, which contributed to the anti-feudalism core theme of the May Fourth movement. However, these works may only be considered to "leave a feminine

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touch” on the writings of the 1930s and 1940s and are far from attaining a genuine “awakening” of the female body and sexuality from the later feminist perspectives (Li 1994: 303).

However, when the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) took over the reins of Mainland China, the situation became worse, and the “awakening” almost drifted off to another sleep. Women were granted equal rights in politics, economics, education and marriage by the socialist state, however, these gains were only given at the price of being exploited of their individual or gender differences under the rubric of a nationalist agenda. Through combined “coercion, negotiation, propaganda and education”, women were gradually politicized and desexualized; moreover, during the Cultural Revolution, “traces of femininity and sexuality were further sanitised and nearly erased” (Gong 2010: 296-297). In the eight model operas that enjoyed enormous popularity among the Chinese masses during the Cultural Revolution, women were transformed into “mere vessels of class ideology, sexually neutralized revolutionary militants” (Li 1994: 305). Zhou (2001:8-9) notices the same trend reflected in film texts produced at the revolutionary eras of socialist New China and that “the filming never presented their [women’s] bodies in a sexual way [and that] tremendous care was given to minimize the presence of female beauty and the female body” (2001: 8-9).

With the end of the Cultural Revolution, the coming Open Up reforms and the import of modern Western thoughts, there came about a gradual maturity of Chinese thought. This change or maturation saw a gradual disengagement from the irrational and chaotic political movements and struggles, and more understanding about femininity, female desires and sensualities and “a more tolerant, open public ethos emerged toward the subject of gender, sexuality, love, and marriage” (Gong 2010: 298).

As a result of this liberation of thought, writers and filmmakers started to challenge the orthodox or established imagination and expectation of female desire, body and sex. Using these new weapons to question the rationale of the CCP’s political and social ideals, in particular the constraints, monitoring and oppression it applied to individual choice, especially in relation to sex.

Wang Anyi and Tie Ning are two pioneering writers whose texts such as *Love in a Small Town* (Xiaocheng zhi lian, 1986), *Love in a Beautiful Valley* (Jinxiugu zhi lian, 1986) and *The Haystack* (Maijie duo, 1986), and *The Rose Gate* (Meigui men, 2006) are all rich in sensual and sexual depictions of women. These novels trace an “awakening” female subjectivity, which is fully suppressed during the revolutionary eras of socialist China. According to Larson (1997: 205):

The strong feminist expressions that are part of the Western discourse of desire—the glorification of female erotic subjectivity, or jouissance, and the construction of a theory of the body that reworks it as the ultimate site of resistance, pleasure, and in more general terms, reality—have also appeared in China. Less often in critical texts but more frequently in fiction by women writers, including the later works of Wang Anyi and the stories by Chen Ran.

The early works of the internationally renowned Chinese Fifth Generation directors employ female desire and body discourse to cast doubt about the patriarchal hierarchy and the overall tyrannical ambiance of the CCP socialist regime. Mo Yan, Nobel Laureate and author of *The Red Sorghum* (Hong gaoliang, 1987), claims that his basic motive in writing this novel was to protest the oppressive atmosphere permeating Chinese society during the early stages of the

socialist government. He hopes that people can become more individual and live a more unrestrained life.

Similarly, Jiang Wen's film, *Those Brilliant Days* (Yangguang canlan de rizi, 1995) romanticizes the revolutionary fever which is found in a group of teenagers and their life experiences during the Cultural Revolution. By amplifying and exaggerating their impulsive sexual exploits, which according to Larson is a "revolutionary eroticism" (1999: 422), this film critiques the over-oppressed desire and body existence during the revolutionary years.

Other writers and film producers also employ these body politics and sexual politics to engage with politically sensitive topics or social taboos of the CCP regime, such as the Cultural Revolution, the Tiananmen democratic demonstration and even the socialist grand-narrative itself. According to Mottier (1998: 113):

Sexual identities are politically relevant since they are constituted within fields of power. They are not merely the expression of natural instinct, but are social as well as political constructs...As a result, and against the backdrop of individualization and detraditionalisation processes, sexuality is not a predefined 'given' anymore. It has become an empty signifier, opening up to plural meanings and interpretations.

There is a natural relationship between body and power. "Artistic experimentation with the body, like many controversial avant-garde movements, becomes inevitably entangled with power and desire" (Deng 2010: 282). In Achee Min's novel *Red Azalea* (Hong dujuan, 1994), the perplexity and bewilderment caused by the maturing process of an educated<sup>1</sup> young female's body serves a metaphor for the overall troubled memory of the Cultural Revolution and highlights the body's utility and power in interpreting revolutionary memories.

Likewise, Chen Ran's novel *Private Life* (Siren shenghuo, 2000) and Hong Ying's novel *Summer Betrayal* (Beipan de xiatian, 1997) also enlist the female body and sexuality as a springboard from which the writers express their disappointment and pain at both the male-dominated social hierarchy and the terminated demonstration at Tiananmen Square. Similarly, Lou Ye's film *Summer Palace* (Yi heyuan, 2006) also reveals the promiscuous relationship between the growing and maturing female body and spirited revolutionary actions of the Tiananmen demonstration. In this film, the female body and its sexual encounters symbolize the complex precocity of the young demonstrators' mentality and behaviours which magnifies the bewildered psychology of the youth from the postsocialist and postrevolutionary eras.

With regard to sexual politics in contemporary Chinese fiction, there is a relationship between the "fascination with eroticism" and the "fascination with history", and experimental fiction combats political oppression through "challenging sexual repression, eroticism", which, as a result, "disrupt the established social order" (Hu 1996: 52). Hu is obviously inspired by the feminist critic Alice Jardine, whom he quotes in his article. According to Jardine, the gynes, the "feminine" and the "woman" combined, has forged a new discursive means that "re-incorporates" and "reconceptualizes" the "non-knowledge" of the "master narratives" of the Western modernity process (Jardine 1985: 25). Here, the "female" related discourse has been employed by Jardine to reinterpret and challenge the Western modernity program. Based on her experiences, Hu also re-examines the Chinese socialist history through the sexual history of female characters in contemporary Chinese fictions. In doing so, the potential of desire, body and

sexuality to undermine master narratives is uncovered, and their power of overriding and overwriting the dominant modes of historiography is revealed (Hu 1996: 49-66).

Besides Hu's contribution in analysing the body politics and sexual politics of the female characters in novels, Zhu also marks out the "obvious" power of female desire, body and sex in contemporary Chinese fictions. With a more particular focus, Zhu notices that instead of "enlarging" their bodily and sexual desires, writers also play politics with the female body in nuanced ways, such as victimizing and hospitalizing them. Through these "self-victimization" and "self-hospitalization" processes, women could "repossess" their own body, venting their fury against sexual repression and unequal gender hierarchy (Zhu 1994: 329-338).

Based on the above discussion, I will argue that feminine desire, body and sexuality have become a fertile ground in terms of articulating individual opinion, appealing to gender suppression and inequality, questioning social establishments, rewriting history, and challenging the orthodox discourse and grand-narratives of a CCP-led China. The famous and controversial French thinker Michel Foucault introduced the term "body politics", which is alternatively referred to as "biopolitics" by Sheldon Lu (2007: 54). Since the end of the Cultural Revolution, Chinese writers have successfully applied and manipulated this academic jargon in their texts. The use of this terminology opens a novel space for the "bodily" and "sexually" rich texts in their conversation with the historical, political, social and cultural trajectories and discourses in modern and contemporary China.

The majority of the texts mentioned above contain distinct female body and sexuality narratives and act as a counter-rhetoric of the patriarchal, gender biased hierarchy of the orthodox political and historical discourse of socialist China. Advancing from the avant-garde body and sex narrative in contemporary China, this paper engages with the revolutionary years and specifically refers to the early decades of the PRC, through critiquing two contemporary Chinese popular TV drama series: *The Place Where Dreams Start* (1999 dir. Ye Jing) and *Blow the North Wind* (2009 An Jian). It will examine the rhetoric and politics of the female body and sexuality in the context of socialist revolution. In particular, it will examine the bodily and sexual pursuit of revolutionary females and their relationships and interactions with the revolution.

In comparison to literary and film texts, television drama is a less fertile ground in regard to producing narratives of body and sexuality during the early stage of the postsocialist and postrevolutionary China. Most TV serials that depicted personal encounters during revolutionary eras did not employ female body and sexual desire to explore and question the political chaos and suffering of those absurd times—they lacked a feminist perspective. For example, most TV serials made during the second half of the 1980s and early 1990s that deal with the life stories of the sent-down youth, such as *Wasted Time* (Cuotuo suiyue, 1982), *A Storm is Coming Tonight* (Jinye you baofengxue, 1984) and *Year by Year* (Nianlun, 1994), are simply life-narratives of the send-down youths. These stories lack reference to the body or sensuality and fail to reflect the suppression of femininity and female sexuality. Many of these popular revolutionary TV dramas made since the end of the 1980s, such as *Plain-clothed Policeman* (Bianyi jingcha, 1987) and *Years of Burning Passion* (Jiqing ranshao de suiyue, 2001), highlight the traditional and orthodox image of the Chinese woman, without any elements of sensuality, body focus or sex.

From the end of the 1990s, however, more TV serials set in the revolutionary decades became more "emotionalized", "sensualized" and "commoditised" and began to utilize body politics to retrospect the revolutionary discourse. *The Place Where Dreams Start* and *Blow the North Wind* are two stereotypical examples that recruit body politics of the female to mirror the political irrationality and social absurdity of the revolutionary eras of socialist China. Through

the suppression, manipulation and abuse of the female body and sexual desire, the rationale of the Chinese revolution is ridiculed and condemned. These two particular plays are chosen to be examined in this paper mainly due to their vivid restoration of the revolutionary settings and atmosphere, their popularity among the contemporary Chinese TV audiences and their rich depiction of emotions, sensuality and sexuality. In addition, these two dramas are typical examples of the revolutionary nostalgia TV serials that are a successful cultural trope and commodity in the current Chinese cultural market.

Revolution nostalgia, as a subgenre, is an established pattern in the current Chinese TV drama scene. In conjunction with a resurgent trend for Maoist nostalgia, a trend which is triggered by both the top-down political conservatism and the bottom-up dissatisfaction with the economic reforms, revolutionary nostalgia TV uses the appeal of the 'Red' classics, marketing to a nostalgia trend prevalent in the contemporary Chinese cultural environment. The shows also experiment with sexualizing the Revolutions. By fore-grounding the female body and desire during the revolutionary eras, female sensuality, body image and sexuality are employed by the revolution nostalgia TV serials to manufacture marketing demands that appeal to the aesthetics of the contemporary TV consumer. In doing so, sex, sexuality and femininity are given a new dynamic by being brought into existence and defined in the perspective of the previously asexual ideologies of the revolutionary years, which indirectly mocks and condemns the irrationality of the revolutionary logic that mirrors the collective memory of the Chinese people.

This paper will adopt a feminist perspective, and it will examine how the female figures in these stories participated in and devoted themselves to the Revolution and how, despite their devotion, they were rejected by the Revolution. Female desire, body and sexuality generate alternative perspectives to gauge the Chinese revolutionary discourse, and, in the texts examined, "women" are suppressed, manipulated, abused and betrayed by the Revolution and revolutionary principles, and eventually they are repudiated and sabotaged by the revolutionary discourse.

### ***The Place Where Dreams Start***

*The Place Where Dreams Start* recounts the stories of a group of youths who are non-political and who were "left behind" (in Beijing and not sent to the country) during the Cultural Revolution. Most of these teenagers, aged between fifteen and twenty, are from cadres' families, and during Beijing's Cultural Revolution era these sons and daughters of cadres figure prominently as a particular clique, or fashion set of the culture of the city. Song Jingsheng and Song Jianjun are two brothers who meet Luo Dongna and Wen Xiaoya, respectively, at the skating rink. Later, they fall deeply in love with them but are forced to part after they join the army. Due to their wilful personalities, both Song Jingsheng and Luo Dongna are discharged from the army. Luo, who is pregnant, sees Song as a heartless man. After that, Song Jingsheng marries Xin Pingping, the girl he saved on his way to the army. However, their marriage does not work out, as Song Jingsheng is still deeply in love with Luo Dongna and this hurts Xin Pingping's feelings enormously. Song finally divorces Xin after she is lured into an illicit affair with a foreign man and is sentenced to prison. Song Jingsheng reunites with the still-single Luo Dongna, and they together begin a new life.

Song Jianjun's and Wen Xiaoya's army postings see them stationed in different places. Wen's legs are broken during the 1976 Tangshan earthquake, and she is paralysed. She does not want to burden Song Jianjun's future, so she hides the truth from him and leads him to believe that she is dead. From then on, Song does not think about love anymore and devotes himself to

his career, eventually becoming an accomplished military officer. Song eventually finds out that Wen is alive but dying. They meet in hospital, and Song takes Wen to the skating rink where she finally finds happiness again and then tragically dies.

### **Narrative of Body**

One objective of this paper is to unlock the relationships between female body, gender and the Chinese socialist revolution, in order to reveal their interplays and veiled confrontation. Here, in discussing *The Place*, body is employed as a metaphor that functions as a mediator between female and the revolution. By focussing on the discourse of the female body in both its physical and metaphysical metamorphoses, the body of woman is a battlefield which serves as a fertile epistemological ground, while at other times playing as an impediment in terms of serving the socialist revolutionary cause. Furthermore, from a feminist viewpoint, the female body is also a very ambiguous issue, being both a nexus where manipulation and villainy serve to prevent men from acting loyally to the principles of the revolution and an enriching device and a devout logo that is both inceptive of and encouraging to men's success.

The delineation of the female body and image in *The Place* has its beginning in the vague and surreal qualities of Luo Dongna's body. Her body is graceful and is presented tightly-wrapped in her army uniform, which she has re-tailored to fit her slim body. With her hair down to her shoulders, Luo "cat walks" in the army compound, attracting many voyeuristic looks from the male soldiers. Socialist revolutionary protocol urged the wearing of simple, revolutionary attire, and Chinese citizens were encouraged to "struggle for political correctness and to put aside the pursuit of self-adornment" (Ip, 2003: 350), and Luo's over attention to her appearance turns her into an unconventional figure in Maoist China.

As an entertainment soldier,<sup>ii</sup> Luo stands out from others and is criticized by the political instructors in her brigade: "Look at you, if we actually encounter enemies, how can you manage to run?" In another scene that highlights Luo Dongna's femininity and her corresponding unsuitability to be a revolutionary soldier, her elegant and petty-bourgeois silhouette is shown standing by the window of her bedroom while playing violin. This image confronts the revolutionary way of thinking of the worker-peasant-soldier as it is promoted and propagated by the socialist revolutionary meta-narrative. But it is precisely this image of Luo that seduces Song Jingsheng and ultimately leads to his illegitimate premarital sex with her. With the classic Chinese love music *Butterfly Lovers*<sup>iii</sup> playing, Song is confused and appears to hallucinate as he sees the beautiful spectre of Luo's body. He is captured both physically and mentally. Although obscene plots that may be necessary for the story are dealt with in a perfunctory manner, a Cixousian jouissance can be detected and shared by the female audience. Luo's role has its prototype, which is isolated, suppressed and deleted by the revolutionary history, however, its absence in "real" history has been compensated for by its "amplified" representation in the postrevolutionary television TV dramas.

The reforming re-inscription of the Maoist past

"gives primacy to erotic expression as a means of understanding the past, the present, and the future, and situates Chinese culture within an established global—Western—context of sexualized stories and images, and in a more generalized foregrounding of desire" (Larson 1999, 422).

Larson's position, in part, reflects the change of the situation of the Chinese woman and the overall social and moral milieu in the past decades after the Opening Up reforms. Having been released from the traditional Confucian and the modern socialist revolutionary moral bindings, the contemporary Chinese woman now is more liberal in mindset and sexual desire and pursuit. The sensual female image has been made into a commodity in the Chinese cultural marketplace, which is primarily dominated by the consumer demand and power. Therefore, the portrayal of the liberal-minded and bold female revolutionaries in the TV serials must keep up with this fashion. From the perspective of the contemporary Chinese audiences, their viewing satisfaction and enjoyment is privileged rather than a recollection of history or lesson on the Revolution. As a result, their collective memory of the revolutionary era is emotionalized and sensualized.

Among the youth of the Revolutionary era, a discourse of love and premarital sex was not something uncommon, and it constituted a major part of a young person's life. During the chaos of revolution, when adults were busy with political matters and unable to devote much time to their children, the children, and especially the teenagers, enjoyed enormous freedom, for the most part doing whatever they wanted to do. Often this included things that under normal circumstances they would never consider, and talking about love was routine. The boys nicknamed it *paipozi* (hooking up with girls), and they nicknamed girls who were willing to "flirt" with them as *quanzi* (prostitute). When a group of boys and girls spend a night together, it is referred to as *shuaye* (stay out the whole night), which, in the Beijing dialect takes on a cavalier, "devil-may-care" understanding.

In Luo Dongna and Song Jingsheng's case, Luo is always the audacious and "evil" Eve with a sexually overt body that enchants Song into ignoring the obligations of revolutionary youth. When Luo Dongna finds out that she is pregnant with Song's child, she is discharged from the army as her behaviour blemishes the glorious revolutionary traditions of the People's Liberation Army. Here, Luo's loss of virginity signifies her loss of loyalty to the revolutionary cause. Luo's case exemplifies how the female body is politicised and disparaged and used symbolically as a venue of betrayal for the revolutionary cause. From the voyeuristic male gaze to the voluptuous lovemaking, and from the contour of her sensuous body clinging onto the window-sill to the enrapturing expression in her eyes, Luo is transferred from an innocent proletarian soldier to a sensual pleasure dome and siren-like female evildoer.

Apart from conforming to Western ideas and criteria that have surreptitiously intruded into the Chinese cultural landscape, the contemporary Chinese revolutionary nostalgia TV drama must cater to its own domestic market. Nevertheless, the market that is "concerned with producing an entertaining show first and foremost, persists in portraying women as spectacles and sex objects" (Gong 2010, 299). The design of Luo's role successfully grasps the conjuncture between revolutionary fervour and sensual desires of contemporary Chinese society. Having been constrained by the morality of socialist China for so long, the Chinese masses are eager to retrieve their long gone (bio-logical) right of sensual and sexual enjoyment. Thus, femininity and female sensuality have become fertile ground for producing appealing literary, filmic and television texts. Consequently, the Chinese woman is emancipated bodily and spiritually, and the transformation of Luo is actually a transformation of contemporary Chinese imagination and pursuit of love and sexual enjoyment. As characters in revolutionary literary works and the people of the revolution suffer together, Luo and the contemporary television viewers enjoy the corporeal and emotional "orgasm" simultaneously.

However, Luo Dongna's self-corrupting "evil" ways cause her boyfriend, Song Jingsheng, to go astray by constantly thinking of Luo and the sensual aura she emits. In Western



societies women's bodies have been assumed to "inherently turn them into sexual seductresses who threaten men's bodies and souls" (Rose, 2010: 3). Rose's argument matches very well with the Luo Dongna figure and character. Song's craving for Luo switches his focus from revolution to the "inconsequential" matters of love, eventually leading to his own discharge from the army. Song's father is deeply disappointed in him and sees him as being of little consequence in comparison with his brother. In summary, Luo Dongna may be regarded as a rebellious and unconventional figure due to her capacity to portray a womanly way of love and life in a revolutionary political and social context. She is femininity exemplified: subtle, sensitive, desirable and desiring, sexually eager and vulnerable; all qualities which were both paradoxically exploited and silenced by the socialist revolutionary discourse.

Another significant female figure in *The Place* is Wen Xiaoya. She appears as a more submissive and altruistic character when juxtaposed with Luo Dongna. Wen Xiaoya is born into a high-ranking army official's family. She thus receives the harshest and most authentic socialist revolutionary education and cultivation, making her the embodiment of revolutionary justice and correctness. For example, when the Song brothers make fun of her childhood mate, the son of their housekeeper, Li Dongzheng, Wen, in true revolutionary style, protects him. However, Wen is more than just a drab daughter-of-the-revolution, and she appreciates Luo Dongna's extraordinary beauty and her courageous "avant-garde" outlook and personality. She sees and appreciates her distinctiveness and develops a personal relationship with her bordering on worship. Wen Xiaoya's subtle and introverted nature makes her a compliant and acquiescent female, a role type which falls neatly into the expectations of men. However, Wen's fate is not as easy as her disposition. In the 1976 Tangshan earthquake, Wen is buried in the ruins of her army dormitory. When she awakes in hospital, she finds herself profoundly and permanently paralysed from the waist down. Just as Luo Dongna's body is amplified and highlighted in the show, Wen Xiaoya's body is amputated, "concealed" and made chaste. Wen's physical impotence impedes her ability to serve the revolution physically, but ironically she becomes a spiritual mentor of her lover, Song Jianjun. In this way, Wen's body is paradoxically both dead and alive, and her mind is both dejected and full of expectations.

In one scene, Wen Xiaoya and Song Jianjun bid farewell on a train to Tangshan on the day both of them are heading for their respective army brigades. Wen asks Song to recite the lines from a well-known British movie, *The Red Shoes*, which has motivated and encouraged her so much. Song reads:

*The Red Shoes* tells a story about a girl who wanted to have a pair of red shoes, and finally she had them. Wearing the shoes, she went to a party, where she danced and danced. Eventually, she felt tired and wanted to have a rest. But the red shoes were not tired, they kept swirling, spinning, kept dancing, taking her through the mountains, crossing the fields—life disappeared and love vanished. At last, she died.

It is here that Wen is deeply obsessed by the strength and passion of the female character in *The Red Shoes*, and is determined to devote herself to the socialist revolutionary cause which is rampaging across China at that time. She wants to dance non-stop like Vicky in *The Red Shoes*, an allegory for the contribution she wants to make to the Revolution. Legs are indispensable for a dancer, and when Wen loses her legs, this serves as a simile for the impossibility for her to "dance" on the revolutionary stage. In the grieving departure scene, Wen turns Song from a wild

and rebellious youth to a decent soldier and makes him promise to behave in the army and be a good revolutionary. In order not to encumber Song's life, Wen covers the truth from him. Believing that Wen is dead, Song reorients his life goal to become a high-achieving army general in order to comfort Wen's soul. In the development of the plot, the amputation of Wen's legs and the mutilation of her body operate as a springboard of Song's career and eventual transformation.

Because of Wen's Xiaoya's appalling predicament, her parents accept Li Dongzheng's offer to marry and take care of Wen in the name of revolutionary comradeship and companionship. However, under his hypocritical and ostentatious sympathy and commiseration, Li ridicules Wen's incapacity (because of the dysfunction of her body) to fulfil a wife's obligations and does not allow her to contact her close friends, including Luo Dongna. Li also condemns Wen's mental infidelity to him by her constant longing for Song and their past love. In those dark days of her life, Song's success becomes the only light in Wen's tiresome existence, and she dedicates herself to writing a book recounting their "good old days". Here, Li's perverse and misogynistic treatment of Wen, camouflaged under the discourse and ideal of the revolutionary comradeship, lampoons Wen's genuine revolutionary ardour which is quieted by the dysfunction of her body. Wen's incapacitated body is a motif which rebuffs women's prospects to be a desired revolutionary soldier and also to be a fulfilled and qualified wife.

However, a crippled body does not block her aspirations to chase the revolutionary dreams and ideals. In Wen Xiaoya's case, when Song Jianjun (who eventually realizes his dream to become a general), is holding her dying body at the skating rink where they first meet and fall in love, he famously sings a Yugoslavian song. Its title and theme is, "A tiny road which is narrow and long, leading to the foggy distance, and I will track its path and follow my lover to the battlefield". This song presumably pleases Wen and allows her to finally rest in peace. The concurrence of Song's ultimate success and Wen's death again excludes women from partaking in the Revolution and sharing in its glory.

Another female character worthy of a close inspection in *The Place* is Xin Pingping, the woman Song Jingsheng marries after he is separated from Luo Dongna. From a feminist aspect, Xin Pingping is a more tragic figure than Luo Dongna or Wen Xiaoya. If Luo Dongna gets pleasure from her body and Wen Xiaoya finds happiness in the spiritual domain, Xin enjoys neither. Xin actually acts as a saviour who gives Song refuge when he misunderstands Luo and misinterprets that she has shunned him. Without Luo's natural beauty and charismatic traits and Wen's high quality and self-restraint, Xin is no more than just an ordinary and mediocre woman. Just as Luo Dongna did, Xin Pingping dresses up in fashionable clothes and wears makeup, and she also offers herself to Song Jingsheng before marriage. She gives birth to Song's child, yet, for all her endeavours, she is repulsive to Song, and he says: "The most regrettable thing I have ever done in this life is to marry you!" With a broken heart and feeling on the brink of insanity, Xin takes revenge on Song by injuring herself. Her first attempt at suicide, cutting her wrist artery, is aborted, and her second suicide attempt, which is bashing her head against the floor until it is covered with blood, shocks both Song Jingsheng and Luo Dongna while she begs Luo to leave Song.

Xin Pingping's brutal treatment towards her own body sheds light on how disagreements were settled and how revenge was taken during the Cultural Revolution. Growing up with her elder brother Xin Heizi, Xin Pingping succumbs to his upbeat optimism. Xin Heizi though is a troubled youth and a "battle fighter"—a street brawler. In the revolutionary confusion of Beijing society, most days would find him and other hot-blooded youths facing each other in deadly street battles. Armed with whatever implements of killing they could find, including knives,

buckled belts, sticks and iron bars, they would attack each other. Sometimes these were small skirmishes involving only a few, and at other times their fighting would erupt into large-scale “warfare” between hundreds of youthful combatants. One scene in the drama shows two hostile groups jostling for the dominant position around a few hundred people congregated in front of the Wu Gate of the Forbidden City, ready to spill each other’s blood in their upcoming struggle.

Like her brother, Xin Pingping brings this brutal, violent and revolutionary way of body disregard to herself and her marriage. Here, Xin Pingping’s morbid way of treating her body is highly influenced by the revolutionary manner of body wounding. Also, Xin Pingping’s venomous jealousy of Luo Dongna seems in strident contrast with Luo’s sympathy of her when she sees blood gushing out of Xin’s forehead. Luo’s almost narcissistic care of her body also noticeably contrasts with Xin’s masochistic handling of her own.

The most violent act Xin Pingping does to her body is to have it ravished by a foreigner, an act which is enormously disgusting to a Chinese woman, particularly in those times. Xin Pingping’s pornographic liaison or prostituting, especially with foreigners, leads to the revolutionary authority locking her up. Xin Pingping’s female body symbolizes a traitor to the revolutionary narrative and once again isolates women and their bodies from the socialist revolutionary discourse. The female body and sexuality are seen as emblems of one’s loyalty to the nation, and its loss to a foreigner signifies one’s betrayal and infidelity to the nation and the revolutionary cause. Here, in this contrasting part of *The Place Where Dreams Start*, the female body and sexuality are constructed and manipulated to serve a nationalist discourse, where it is eventually crucified as a traitor to the Revolution and the Chinese nation as a whole. For the revolutionary women it is overtly a place where dreams end!

### ***Blow the North Wind***

*Blow the North Wind* is another Cultural Revolution-themed television drama which was released at the beginning of 2009. *North Wind* became a hit immediately after its showing and leads the favourite shows ranking as voted by television audiences. The recognition and popularity *North Wind* enjoys makes it a standout example among the similarly-themed dramas. The show recounts a story about a group of zhishiqingnian (educated youth) in a remote, northern China village<sup>iv</sup>. Unlike those in *The Place*, the sent down youth depicted in *North Wind* do not have the good fortune to experiment with the “luxurious”, sensational and wild lifestyles created by the unique political atmosphere. Instead, they have to cope with the callous and difficult natural environment. After the initial revolutionary fervour and ecstasies recede, the sent down youth soon become conscious of their situation. They are isolated and feel abandoned. They feel doubly harmed, for, apart from the hard work allocated to them by the production brigade, they feel that they also have to find ways to bring some hope and enjoyment to their dreary lives. Most importantly, however, they need to find some influential connections and valid reasons to return to the cities they have come from.

The storylines of the *North Wind* also revolve around two pairs of lovers: Zhao Chunli and Da Pang and Liu Qing and Shuai Hongbing. These two pairs of lovers are symbolic of all the “sent down youth”. They repeatedly ignore the teachings and doctrines of the socialist revolution while negotiating their recalcitrance and mutiny with the authorities and official mainstream coaching. Zhao and Da Pang’s nonconformity lies in their constant curiosity about sex, while Shuai’s main concern is his petty bourgeoisie ideology. Shuai Hongbing is a man of many talents. He is a master in performing Peking Opera, stage drama and ballet, and he is familiar

with many foreign literary classics. Stendhal's *The Red and the Black* is his favourite, and every night after working in the fields and forest, he retells a scene of the novel to the rest of his peers. His storytelling lands him in trouble, however, and it is criticized in line with the socialist politics by the female production bridge director, Niu Xianhua. A couple of years older than the sent down youth, Niu is an "iron girl" (strong women) character and has been heavily influenced by socialist revolutionary ideology. However, after intimate contact with Shuai, Niu's "iron" stand wavers, and she confesses that: "Shuai is not a bad person". Attracted to and captured by Shuai's literary and artistic talent, Niu falls for Shuai. Tortured by her ambivalent feelings toward Shuai, Niu finally marries him when Shuai sadly and satirically becomes disabled while trying to find a way to return to the city.

Niu Xianhua's destiny is altered by her marriage to Shuai Hongbing after his "magical" recovery and eventual release from his countryside exile. Niu comes to the city with Shuai and struggles to adjust to urban living. As an "iron girl" in the revolutionary era, Niu becomes a successful female entrepreneur in the post-Mao, postrevolutionary China. Compared to her career, Niu's marriage is under constant intimidation from Shuai's reunion with his previous lover, Liu Qing. Trapped in a dying marriage, Liu suffers because of her perverse husband. Although a successful business woman, Liu's family life and emotional world are lifeless, a situation which motivates her to find the love she requires from Shuai.

### **Rhetoric of Sex**

Devoid of sexual enjoyment and elimination of gender discrepancy, the socialist revolution in Mao's era appears austere. Therefore, vestiges of womanliness are not easily found in the revolutionary realist literary works of contemporary China. Still, women's nature and deference cannot be utterly rejected and captured by revolutionary fanaticism. Sex, sexuality and femininity find their way in the progress of the Revolution, justifying and defending their existence and dynamics against the suffocating and overwhelming political milieu. Although these themes were banned during the revolutionary eras, the post-Mao, postrevolutionary popular culture restores them to historical "fact" faithfully and creatively, in order to revive history and at the same time capture the interest of the contemporary Chinese audience. Female body and sexual fantasy have been commoditised and have become a product of consumption in contemporary China. However, it is exactly this commercialization of body and sex that enables the previously hidden to be disclosed, and to provide a unique feminist perspective on the life of women during the revolutionary eras. Thus, the changing political, economic and moral context of Chinese society has changed completely the situation of woman of China and the image they have of themselves. From suppressed to emancipated, and from obfuscation and denial of body and sex to exposition and display of them as an entertaining commodity, the contemporary TV serials reveal, logicalize, legitimize and cash in on the enormous changes that have happened to Chinese women.

Niu Xianhua is a stereotypical "victim" of the revolutionary discourse, which casts her into the role and symbol of an iron girl, a custodian of the revolutionary feminist identity, and an icon of revolution itself<sup>v</sup>. Nonetheless, Niu's ideology is not always as steadfast as it appears, and it is often challenged, especially when her self-discipline is engulfed by her fascination with Shuai Hongbing. The gentle and elegant movement when he performs ballet and his slim and long limbs wavering in the air have all been left to Niu's gaze to imagine what she pleases and desires. A gender misalignment occurs when Shuai's dancing and body signify the feminine

features, and, vice versa, Niu's gaze espouses a male scopophilic sense. Shuai's womanliness awakens Niu's hibernating awareness of herself as a woman. As long as she is immersed in the political and military lifestyle, Niu gradually separates from her womanly senses and manners, and Shuai's performance causes her to retrieve those parts which have long gone from her. Niu's personal emancipation from state emancipation begins. As Cui marks out:

"Emancipation" thus alters a sexually distinct human being into a sexless subject of the nation-state. For decades, Chinese women have "enjoyed" the awarded liberation without having a clear sense of their sexual suppression at the hands of the ideology of consensus...The ideological conventions that enabled the negation of sexual difference made it impossible for women to be "women" (2003: 55).

Zhao Zhunli is another symbolic female figure produced by *North Wind*. Zhao's sexual weakness is attributed to her lack of political awareness, her playgirl nature and a hedonistic view of life. Isolated from the larger outside world and compelled to do laborious farm work in extremely harsh conditions, Zhao sees a future with little hope. The revolution has little concern for her, as she has realized that she has been jettisoned by it, and only the harsh reality confronting her at the moment seems real. Most of the Cultural Revolution's sent-down youth share similar sentiments to Zhao's, especially as they come to understand that the underlying reason for Mao's Cultural Revolution is to stir up turmoil. According to their understanding, the sent-down youth had become a troublesome issue for Mao, and all he now wanted to do was to get rid of them, and so the countryside was actually a destination of exile.

Finding herself in this situation, Zhao, without much relief from the day-to-day monotony of her life-in-exile, seeks release from her bewildering situation through a sexual and romantic relationship. Honig has argued that "[f]or educated youth, life in the countryside was punctuated by flirtation and sex. From the perspective of young men, negotiations about sex and romance were crucial to enlivening an otherwise dreary existence" (2003: 158). Zhao and her boyfriend, Da Pang, imitate the voluptuous sexual pleasures practiced by Julien and Madame de Renal that are vividly recounted by Shuai Hongbin during his evening storytelling routine. Here, with Shuai Hongbin's magnetic voice telling of the sensual and promiscuous affair between Julien and Madame de Renal in the oil lamp-lit and dilapidated dormitory, the revolutionary imagination is momentarily surpassed and subverted by a petty bourgeoisie sentiment. Shuai recites a scene from *The Red and the Black*:

Julien is lying on the bed, visualizing having sex with Madame de Renal. Suddenly, Julien hears somebody walking. My God, here comes Madame de Renal. A sudden sound of breathing makes him tremble from head to foot. At that moment, a wet, soft and savoury lip sticks to Julien's mouth. The passion is burning and melts the two of them together.

Zhao and Da Pang's sex scene in their dormitory bed is an erotically described montage in collaboration with Julien and Madame de Renal's affair. The exotic and middle class context of a 19<sup>th</sup> century French house is replaced by the backward 1960s Chinese revolutionary settings in a farmer's house, generating visual asymmetry and impulse. This is achieved by means of combining the revolutionary props, settings, contexts and passion with the sensual and erotic lovemaking scenes. In so doing, sex is made unfit for a revolutionary context and discourse, so to

the characters who actually conduct these sexual behaviours. In other words, Zhao Zhunli's over indulgence in sexual pleasure lands her in a position doomed to be rejected and condemned by revolutionary morality.

The snow-clad forest also becomes Zhao and Da Pang's venue for wild and erotic sex. As Da Pang says to Zhao, "Chunli, you are really like Madame de Renal. When you calm down, you are like the crystal clear lake water; when you are bold and unrestrained, you are like the rolling waves."

Zhao's uninhibited urge for sex reaches its peak in her frantic search for a condom to protect her from getting pregnant. During the revolutionary period of China, condoms are not something that is easily accessible. In order to legally procure them, one must show a letter of statement issued by his or her work unit to the doctor to prove that he or she is married. Sexual intercourse outside marriage is seen as the behaviour of hooligans even if both participants are single. In fact, the word 'condom' itself was enough to embarrass most Chinese women at that time. However, Zhao Chunli and Da Pang pretend to be a peasant couple who are thoroughly ignorant of sex. The two of them perform in front of the doctor to make her believe that they have no idea of how to avoid getting a baby. The doctor cannot help laughing at their ridiculous and peculiar ideas and finally introduces them to the use of condoms.

If Zhao Chunli's sexual behaviour has an "anti-revolution" implication and is totally repulsed and condemned by the revolutionary ideology, Liu Qing's is more a revolutionary sacrifice—a sacrifice of her body to a corrupt revolutionary cadre. When Liu is intimidated by a political commander who threatens Shuai Hongbin's (her boyfriend's) future by reporting his involvement in a fight, Liu, in order to save Shuai, offers herself to the cadre. Here, again, the female body is betrayed by the revolution. On their wedding night, when Liu's husband finds out that he was tricked into marrying a woman who was not a virgin, as he was led to believe, he is totally shocked and collapses. From then on, he begins to take revenge on his wife by using all manner of violent means, including beating, verbal abuse and sexual torture, which serves a metaphor for the brutal treatment a traitor receives and deserves from the revolutionary regime. Here, Liu Qing's case reminds us of that of Luo Dongna, as both of the girls lose their virginity and are deserted and revenged by the revolutionary discourse and its agents.

In the post-Mao, post-revolution era, many Chinese people plunged themselves into the sea of business, small-scale capitalism and entrepreneurship and became wealthy. The female characters in the *North Wind*, Liu Qing and Niu Xianhua, become well-known entrepreneurs in their local region. Although not officially divorced from Shuai, Niu raises her twin daughters as a single mother. Compared to her husband Shuai Hongbin, who preferred to harm himself in order to escape the disturbing conditions in the rustic village, and showing an extremely negative attitude toward life, Niu shows by her behaviour that she is a strong and competent woman who is able to turn misfortune into good luck, to be independent and to be supportive to her children and family. Similarly, Liu Qing also becomes a very accomplished person by being a *nuqiangren* (a strong and successful woman) and stepping out of the shadow of her ineffectual and miserable family life. Here, the "postrevolutionary" economic situation of China finally offers opportunity for women to become successful and strong, which again ridicules the revolutionary context and discourse that manipulates, abuses and betrays women. In summary, the postsocialist and postrevolutionary era eventually offers the opportunity to the contemporary Chinese female to be a real woman in terms of being economically and sexually equal to her male counterpart.

## Concluding Remarks

A close, feminist reading of body, sex and gender in relation to the female characters of *The Place* and *North Wind* provides examples of unlocking the women's involvement and interrelationship with the Chinese socialist revolution. The rhetoric of body and sex reveals the idiosyncrasy of the relationship between the female and the Chinese Revolution. Acting as a ubiquitous outsider and rule-breaker, the Chinese female is ostracized and rejected by the revolutionary discourse. As body and sex constitute the front line of battle between the female and the Revolution, both of these discourses are twisted and manipulated to deride women's participation in revolution. The value and status of women was gradually renounced and degraded by the revolutionary discourse, which brings into focus the illogical and farcical nature of revolutionary logic in socialist China.

Creatively revisiting the historical facts, contemporary television producers interwove the revolutionary themes into love stories and sexual affairs that obviously have enormous appeal to contemporary Chinese audiences. The rich and vivid use and adoption of sexual fantasy and sensual and erotic depictions of the female body coincidentally and ironically generates a gender perspective which is absent in the previous Revolution-themed television products. A body, sex and gender discourse can be found interwoven and counteracting with the then-dominant political ideology. *The Place* and *North Wind* show that femininity, body and sexual desires were rejected by the revolutionary principles and discourse and that the confrontation between woman and the revolution always takes place through the venue of their body, desires and sexual activities. The female body with all its associated desires and sexual connotations is seen as having negative attributes to the revolutionary cause and even to the reputation of the nation.

Acting as the antitheses of the Chinese revolutionary discourse, femininity, female body, sensuality and sexuality derides and retrospectively critiques the revolutionary logic. On the other hand, the body and sex rhetoric in the revolutionary nostalgia TV serials also reveals the current situation of contemporary Chinese women. Being bodily and sexually exposed and commoditised is not something repugnant to the Chinese female; instead, it is rather a self-entertaining and self-advertising method that is enjoyed by modern Chinese women. The exposition of female body and sex in the Revolution TV dramas not only attacks the irrationality of the socialist revolutionary ideology, but also it reveals the changes that have happened to Chinese women in the past decades—changes which render them more sexually open-minded and free. By combining the revolutionary settings and environment with the emancipated female emotional and sexual desires and pursuits, the two TV drama serials examined in this paper add fresh and insightful viewpoints to our understanding of these specific cultural tropes.

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<sup>i</sup> The sent-down youth or educated youth of the People's Republic of China refers to educated young people who willingly or under coercion, left the big cities and were sent down to live and work in rural areas from the beginning in the 1950s until the end of the Cultural Revolution.

<sup>ii</sup> An entertainment soldier is one whose prime purpose is to entertain the troops and is usually considered as non-combatant.

<sup>iii</sup> *Butterfly Lovers* tells a tragic love story between Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai, which is considered widely as the classic of traditional Chinese romance.

<sup>iv</sup> The north part of China, including the north-eastern provinces (Heilongjiang, Liaoning and Jilin) is famous for its inclement climate, so that the sent-down youth in those areas suffered more than their peers in other parts of China.

<sup>v</sup> Maoist ideology sees the possibility of turning Chinese woman into revolutionary soldiers through "self-study and political classes" and believes in their loyalty to serve the country and people. For more discussion see Esther Lee Yao, 1983, *Chinese Women: Past & Present*, Texas, Ide House, Inc.